A QUEST FOR GODLINESS

A Book Review

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by

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Introduction

J. I. Packer, who was the Professor of Theology at Regent College in British Columbia when he penned *A Quest for Godliness*, has studied the Puritans for almost a lifetime. His study of them has shaped his Christian life and ministry. He was educated at Oxford University, served as a minister at St. John’s Church and the Principal at Tyndale Hall. He widely preaches and lectures throughout England and the United States. His self-proclaimed motivation for writing this treatise on the Puritans is that the modern church and evangelicalism need to have the knowledge and influence of the Puritans. This review will generally outline the contents of the book and interact with the general usefulness of the Puritans to Christianity and the Christian ministry.

Summary

Packer begins his recommendation of the Puritans to our generation by likening them the great Redwood trees of California. He maintains that a visit among the Puritans will dwarf you like a visit to the monstrous forests of the Western United States. He praises the Puritans for their ability to withstand “fire and storm” and still have “growth” (11). He follows by giving examples about how John Owen, Richard Baxter, and others helped fashion him early in his Christian life and throughout his lengthy ministry (12-5).

He continues by giving a profile of the Puritans. This portion of the book begins with an explanation of why this generation needs the Puritans. Packer states that our lack of maturity is a main reason we should learn from the Puritans. He writes:

Maturity is a compound of wisdom, goodwill, resilience, and creativity. The Puritans exemplified maturity; we don’t. We are spiritual dwarfs . . . The Puritans, by contrast, as a
body were giants. They were great souls serving a great God. Visionary and practical, idealistic and realistic too, goal oriented and methodical, they were great believers, great hopers, great doers, and great sufferers. . . Spiritual warfare made the Puritans what they were. They accepted conflict as their calling, seeing themselves as their Lord’s soldier-pilgrims, just as in Bunyan’s allegory, and not expecting to be able to advance a single step without opposition of one sort or another (22).

He gives several other lessons that the Puritans can teach us related to their holistic view of their daily lives, the “quality of their spiritual experiences”, their desire for “effective action”, their stability in family life, their value of human worth and their idea of church renewal (23-7). He continues the profile by describing the Puritan movement in terms of revival. He describes the spiritual apathy that drowned England before the rise of Puritanism and how the Puritans sought the spiritual revival of the entire country as their primary aim. Packer writes, “The Puritans wanted, more than anything else, to see the church in England ‘rise’ spiritually, and they saw that this could not be without a renewed ministry” (38). He closes his profile by speaking at length about the practical writing of the English Puritans and its effects. The writings of the Puritans were extremely influential because they were “physicians of the soul”, “expositors to the conscience”, “educators of the mind” and “enforcers of the truth” (64-77).

Packer’s next major section describes the Puritans regard for the Bible. He uses John Owen as the representative of the Puritans’ view of communication from God and the inspiration of the Scriptures. Packer writes, “Once the Scriptures were written, and the prophetic and apostolic witness to Christ was complete, no need remained for private revelation of new truths, and Owen did not believe that any were given” (86). Thus, the Puritans placed a primacy upon the written Word of God. He follows with how the Puritans approached the interpretation of Scripture. He describes their process. They sought to interpret the Scriptures “literally and grammatically” (101). They sought to interpret the Scriptures “consistently and harmonistically” (102). They sought to interpret the Scriptures “doctrinally and theocentrically” (102). They
sought to interpret the Scriptures “christologically and evangelically” (103). They sought to interpret the Scriptures “experimentally and practically” (103). They sought to interpret the Scriptures with a “faithful and realistic application” (104). He finalizes this section of the book with a treatment of the Puritan conscience. Packer writes about the Puritans’ desire, “a concern to know him (God) truly and serve him rightly, and so to glorify him and to enjoy him. But just because this was so, they were deeply concerned about conscience, for they held that conscience was the mental organ in men through which God brought his word to bear on them” (107).

Next, Packer moves to the Puritan understanding of the gospel. He begins with an introduction of Owens’s *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*. He boils down the treatise by Owen as a defense of the premise that “God saves sinners”, which is at the heart of Puritan theology (130). He continues by describing the Puritan view of the doctrine of justification. Justification, to the Puritans, was a mystery, which could be described as good news, supreme, spiritual, life giving, and often contradicted (149-52). Packer follows with how the Puritans preached the gospel. He writes about the context of their approach, “the Puritan approach to winnings souls was controlled by the knowledge that fallen men cannot turn to God by their own strength, nor is it in the power of evangelists to make them do so” (163). He explains that Puritans were thorough in their preaching of the gospel and trusted God to do the work, which nicely transitions to his next section.

Packer turns to communicating the Puritan understanding of the Holy Spirit. He reveals the Puritan thought concerning the witness of the Spirit and its importance in the life of the believer regarding assurance. He quotes from Owen, “Of this joy there is no account to be given, but that the Spirit worketh it when and how he will; he secretly infuseth and distils it into the soul, prevailing against all fears and sorrows, filling it with gladness, exultations; and
sometimes with unspeakable raptures of mind” (189). Packer moves on to the spirituality of John Owen. Friends described Owen as humble and one that knew the power of the gospel (193). Only his personal holiness surpassed his great mind and intellect. He continues with Owen’s understanding of spiritual gifts. He analyzes the Pentecostal Movement in light of Owen’s teaching on the gifts and tells how Owen could help us build a church that promoted every member ministry (220-1).

As he moves near the end, Packer tells how the Puritans viewed the Christian life. He identifies the progress the Puritans made in making Sundays a day that was observed as the Christian Sabbath and its dedication to worship and devotion to God (233-43). He follows the Sabbath with the idea of worship from the Puritan understanding. He writes about how the Puritans defined worship, “the Puritans used the word in its narrower more common sense, to signify simply all our direct communion with God: invocation, adoration, meditation, faith, praise, prayer and the receiving of instruction from his word, both in public and private” (249).

Closing out this section, he applauds the Puritan efforts to build strong marriages and families. He explains how the Puritans improved upon the church’s previous misunderstandings of marriage and family life and help rectify some major hindrances in these areas.

Packer closes his discussion of the Puritans by revealing their approach to ministry. He describes their preaching as “expository in its method”, “doctrinal in its content”, “orderly in its arrangement”, “popular in its style”, Christ-centered in its orientation”, “experimental in its interests” and “piercing in its applications” (284-6). Next, he writes about Puritans and evangelism. He ultimately concludes that the Puritans were hard workers in sowing the word and were highly dependent upon God to bring about the necessary changes in a person’s life. He follows by a brief treatment of Edwards’ view of revival and the advancement of understanding
through his writings on the topic. He closes with a challenge to the reader in the discernment of what Puritanical beliefs and practices should be revived in Christianity and Christian ministry.

**Critical Application**

There is much for us to learn from the Puritans. However, Packer warns about the approach:

Thus, we can have the wrong attitude to these men; we can revere them as infallible authorities. But they would scarify is for such a grow lapse into what they would regard as papalism and idolatry. They would remind us that they were no more than servants and expositors of God’s written word, and they would charge us never to regard their writings as more than helps and guides to understanding that word.

The Puritans are Redwoods compared to the majority of Christianity that exist today; therefore, there are many possible lessons. However, taking Packer’s advice from the end of the book, the modern church can learn the following principles from the Puritans: Trust in the power of God and his word and perseverance in the pursuit of God.

First, the Puritans understood the power of God and his word. This reality permeates the Puritan approach to everything. As mentioned earlier, one instance in which this truth is illustrated is the Puritan system for understanding the history of redemption. The Puritans widely believed and promoted Calvinism. In describing the Puritan view of salvation, Packer writes. “(God) Saves—does everything, first to last, that is involved in bringing man from death in sin to life in glory: plans, achieves, and communicates redemption, calls and keeps, justifies, sanctifies, glorifies” (130). If the modern church could learn this lesson from the Puritans, many reproaches that are conferred on Christianity would be stopped. The modern church has lost this reality and has adopted a man-centered approach to salvation. In the modern church, Jesus is no longer the Sovereign; he is an impotent, possible Savior that hopes someone will choose him. The obvious
result of trust in God in the Puritan ministry was that there was an avoidance of manipulation.

Packer writes:

The only way to the heart, that he (the preacher) is authorized to take runs via the head. So the minister who does not make it his prime business, in season and out of season, to teach the word of God, does not do his job, and the sermon which, whatever else is may be, is not a didactic exposition of Scripture is not worthy on the name (281).

Based upon these few examples, it is clear that we can learn how to rely on the power of God from the Puritans. In addition, they were convinced the power of God’s word. Packer writes concerning personal holiness:

The Puritans knew that Scripture is the unalterable rule of holiness, and never allowed themselves to forget it. Knowing also the dishonesty and deceitfulness of fallen human hearts, they cultivated humility and self-suspicion as abiding attitudes, and examined themselves regularly for spiritual blind spots and lurking inward evils. They may not be called morbid or introspective on this account; however, on the contrary, they found the discipline of self-examination by Scripture, followed by the discipline of confessing and forsaking sin and renewing one’s gratitude to Christ for his pardoning mercy, to be a source of great joy (24).

Unfortunately, our culture is not so dependent upon God’s word to help identify sin and wickedness that still lurks within. So often, those professing to be Christian avoid the clear teaching of Scripture. The Puritans teach us well concerning the authority of the Bible, which is the reason they accepted its contents readily. Packer writes:

The inspiration of Scripture is thus both substantial and verbal: not only the matter, but also the words, are directly from God. ‘As to the doctrine contained in it, and the words wherein that doctrine is delivered, it is wholly his; what that speaks, he speaks himself. He speaks in it and by it.’ It is this sense, and on this account, that we should receive the Bible as the word of God, ‘supernatural, immediate revelation of his mind unto us’ (87).

Once again, the Puritans communicate their reliance and trust in the Scripture to our shame. We

Second, they were great examples in their pursuit of God and knowing him in truth.

Packer writes about the Puritan approach to keeping their conscience related to this area:

Was this scrupulousity? Was their attitude a case of mere rationalised peevishness? Surely not. It is, rather, the supreme illustration of Puritan conscience in action. Two ruling axioms
of Puritan casuistry were (1) that no known truth must be compromised or denied in practice and (2) that no avoidable sin must be committed, how great the good to which such compromise and sin might lead. Expediency is no warrant for unprincipled action; the end does not justify the means (121).

It is clear that the Puritan mindset toward keeping a clean conscience was a ruling principle. However, this is not the case in the modern church. The church today is plagued with members and ministers that do not care for their own consciences or the consciences of others. The overarching pursuit of knowing God personally and practically drove the Puritans to take seriously the state of their heart before God. Another example of perseverance is pursuing God is that of Richard Greenham. The work of this pastor speaks volumes about the Puritan commitment to knowing and serving God. Packer writes:

Richard Greenham, a pastoral pioneer, was incumbent of Dry Drayton . . . He worked extremely hard. He rose daily at four and each Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday preached a sermon at daybreak, to catch his flock before they dispersed into the fields; then on Sunday he preached twice, and in addition catechized the children of the parish each Sunday evening and Thursday morning. Mornings he studied, afternoons he visited the sick or walked out into the fields (43).

To the Puritans, it was paramount to labor in order to know God. This required great self-control and discipline. Once again, the Christians and Christian ministers of today should take a close look at the body of work that Puritans have produced. They are great guides to show a slothful generation how to pursue God and reap the great harvest that comes when God is found.

**Conclusion**

Though more could be stated, Packer’s premise is well founded. We do need the Puritans. They have gone through the fire and remained faithful to the end. They are great role models. They exhibited great maturity in their Christian pilgrimage. We should emulate the maturity of the Puritans and teach the following generations the lessons they have taught us.
Packer’s book is helpful in leading us to find the old paths, so we can trust God and the power of his word and learn how to pursue God persistently for God’s glory alone.